

DER ANBAU DES MUSEUMS (Cultivating the Museum)

Jacques Derrida, Wada Jossen, Theo Kneubühler, Harald Szeemann

Conceived and curated by Stefan Banz

April 4 to May 16, 1992

FIRST KUNSTHALLE LUZERN

Bruchstrasse 14–16, 6003 Lucerne

Der Anbau des Museums (Cultivating the Museum), April 4 to May 16, 1992, is an exhibition consisting of contributions from people who do not primarily think of themselves as artists. Their achievements, however, have not only had a significant influence upon art, but have also decisively extended and transposed the question of what art is or could be, thereby giving the classically defined artist an instrument that enables him to walk on new paths.¹

At the end of the avant-garde, art has been essentially enriched and differentiated. This has occurred especially in connection with philosophy, the theory of perception, and in regard to theories of staging and appropriation. The presuppositions reach back to the initial events at the beginning of this century. One of the most important, it seems to me, is the work of Marcel Duchamp, who, for example, penciled in 1919 a beard onto a reproduction of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. With this act he not only brought one of the most famous and most interpreted works in the history of art into current discussion, but at the same time "misused" it for his own artistic purposes. This placed the question of the situation and possibilities of art upon a new foundation. It pointed to the difficulties of any unambiguous definition of art and made the relative validity of such definitions apparent. By adding the beard to the *Mona Lisa* Duchamp erased, as it were, the gender difference between man and woman and gave the work of art which had been produced by human hand a new visual existence, for not only was the mechanically reproduced copy thus given the same value as the original, but its artistic merit was placed upon an entirely different level by means of the penciled addition. With this act, Duchamp effectively questioned the relation between artistic invention and plagiarism, originality and imitation, and, in a certain sense, the relation between nature and culture as well. He thus took the first step toward relativizing the primacy of the retinal in the context of painting. This artistic act is today, at the end of the century, more relevant than ever. Differentiating and dissolving boundaries, transforming or sublimating the

given, that is, the univocal presuppositions and standpoints by means of reflection, manipulation or displacement has become a central concern today. We are presently faced with the question of whether or not it can still be interesting to view artistic phenomena as works of the classically defined artist, or if it would not be much more fruitful to concern ourselves with creative productions independent of such categories and hierarchies. It would then become possible for works that are not exclusively bound to the retina to play out their “pictorial” significance.

Cultivating the Museum was thus a conglomerate of works that had come to the fore on the edge of art. It represented a connection of different ways of forming. By the very fact of their appearing together in visual space, they relativized their own conditions as well as those of art itself. It is my express concern as curator and artist to place art and its products in a broader and less structured field of discourse, that is, to thematize art upon different terrain and thus give it a new impetus.

HARALD SZEEMANN: MUSEUM OF OBSESSIONS

For more than two decades Harald Szeemann has carried on this tradition as a curator in exhibitions such as *When Attitudes become Form* (1969), *Grossvater - Ein Pionier wie wir* (Grandfather - A Pioneer like Us, 1974), *Junggesellenmaschinen* (Bachelor Machines, 1975), *Monte Verità - Die Brüste der Wahrheit* (Monte Verità - The Breasts of Truth, 1978), and *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* (The Tendency Toward the Total Art Work, 1983). He has materially questioned, extended, and made visible Duchamp's initial impulse in three-dimensional space. For he has realized visions, that is, ideal places of communication and understanding with the help of art works that he placed in a double context. On the one hand, he gave them an opportunity for optimal self-presentation, while on the other hand adding to them and interpreting them on behalf of his own artistic picture of reality. For this reason, when he stages works of art, he always brings an additional level of visual knowledge into play. This is always undertaken in the service of a Museum of Obsessions. His exhibitions not only extend the boundaries of art, but they exercise a significant influence upon artists who attempt to visualize their artistic conceptions in the fashion and with the intention of an exhibitor. But in distinction to Szeemann, they slip into the role of the exhibitor without thereby giving up or relativizing their status as “artists”. Harald Szeemann's visualizations are always a play with his own identity and role. For example, he often hides behind the idea of another (as in the exhibitions of Richard Serra 1990, and of Walter de Maria 1992, in the

Kunsthaus Zürich), then again, he dedicates himself to staging exhibitions (as in *Monte Verità* or *Junggesellenmaschinen*) which produce connections and lines of association leading into completely different areas. But it is always a matter of sounding out marginal zones and boundary areas in regard to an open conglomeration.

In *Der Anbau des Museums*, Szeemann's intervention was neither specifically artistic nor clearly intended to mediate art. He had the following words imprinted upon the floor of the Kunsthalle: "Gedanken ohne Humus sind Blumen ohne Farbe" (Thoughts without humus are flowers without color). When the gardener came later and laid out his garden (about which more below), these words were still present, but invisible. We might say that Szeemann refers to the presuppositions of the visual by removing himself in this way from it. At the same time, however, we could read upon the windows of the Kunsthalle, windows that refer to what is outside, the following words: "Besser sehen durch Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit" (See better by the agency for intellectual foreign labor). Foreign labor is intended to be seen as a creative, determining factor without actually demanding to be present. Both sentences, as acts of intervention, thematize the border between inside and outside, the visible and the invisible, the present and the absent, the metaphorical and the factual. By means of this act, the question of the work of art, which in the conventional sense is not present, is constantly felt. It was the authoritative instance that became the impulse giving form to the entire exhibition.

WADA JOSSEN: ART AS GARDEN

On the floor of the Kunsthalle, where Harald Szeemann had countless times stamped the sentence, "Thoughts without humus are flowers without color," Wada Jossen built an ecologically complete garden with useful as well as with ornamental plants from the local environment. It was a heterogeneous construction opposed to monoculture mentality, but still within the tradition of the home garden. Jossen tended it every day and thereby raised the question of the relation between nature and culture, nature and art, and nature and the museum; a question that literally was thrown from the ground up into the pictorial space of the museum. It was cultivated nature, living, growing, manifest, but still invisible, dying; it was visual experience embodying intellectual as well as sensual nourishment. The garden was cultivated nature, artificial in the context of the art museum. But this was no museum in the traditional sense, for the architectonic conditions of the Kunsthalle suggest much rather the idea of a hot house, a transparent body

between inside and outside; for on the one side, the Kunsthalle is built on to an old house whose windows are visible, while on the other side, one can see the facades of the buildings opposite as well as a small section of forest. Wada Jossen, the gardener, stands in a certain sense for those primeval men and women who were the first to cultivate plants. It can be said that he visualized in an exemplary way the “ground” of any form of visual and aesthetic knowledge. And he demonstrated how the boundaries between natural and artificial processes are blurred. What is nature? Where does she begin? When does nature become culture, human art? Is nature truly something that comes forth from out of itself? Is art always that which is produced, observed, and transposed from without? Where does the dividing line between inside and outside begin? What is a “work” of nature? Is it the spirit of nature bound up with matter? But what is the spirit of art?

As members of a technological culture at the end of the 20th century we have difficulty saying exactly what and where nature is. And still we try again and again to describe nature as the untouched, unchanged green world that should appear before our doors and which usually is not there, indeed, has long vanished. Wherever we go, we discover that the conceiving, constructing, and creating mind has already been there. But what should a non-appropriated and uncultivated nature look like? Even the ecological view of nature cannot really say how natural nature should be, but only how nature exists relative to our goals and to their realization. This means that nature cannot be found in a supposedly a-historical immutability, as little as one would not expect this of art, but rather in a dynamic process of renewal that constantly grows as well as diminishes and that must endure in an existential struggle for survival.

To bring nature into the context of the museum as a diverse, non-economic, but nevertheless not completely untouched “natural culture,” as one might paradoxically put it, was an attempt to open up a space wherein the mutual influence of all things upon each other could become visible. Nature is art, because it is culture, and art is nature, because it is the reality that is constantly undergoing transformation. Wada Jossen’s garden was a plastic construction as art. It was a pretentious place, where all the different plants were challenged to develop themselves in an unusual environment. It was a lush, luxurious garden that postulated diversity in that it was at the same time open and restrictive, artificial and natural, museal and anarchistic. It effected the mental space of the museum, the place of preservation. Some plants dominate over others, leaving some in this garden to wither away before they can flower and stand out. Is this a metaphor for all those works

of art that are kept in a museum without ever reaching the surface, the light, the exhibition rooms, while others are permanently exhibited there, without ever disappearing into the darkness, the anonymity of the storage?

But this garden was also in a certain sense curtailed and forced into the walls of the hot house of the Kunsthalle and thus it was for many plants unsuitable and dangerous. In another sense, however, it remained unlimited, for, with all its qualities, it had found a way into our cultural, aesthetic, and pictorial consciousness. It forced its way into our treasured refuge with its life giving elixirs, it gained access to the fields of our vanity, to our burning longing for eternity, in order to carry us back to the open, ever changing, blooming community of the living.

THEO KNEUBÜHLER: PICTORIAL WORK IN LANGUAGE

The art theoretician and writer Theo Kneubühler developed a work for the garden that had to do with the definition and the pictorial qualities of “script”. He had set up a honeycomb formed construction out of plywood in the middle of the garden. A photographically enlarged track of a beetle was printed on the lower part. On the one side it looked like an abstract drawing and on the other side of the construction it looked like a kind of secret writing that formed itself from the natural movements of the beetle, movements that Kneubühler took up, technically reproduced and worked over. On the vertical planes parts of the track appear again in connection with words and phrases such as “sides in transition,” “glass hesitates,” “wound suture this time,” “near.” They point to the threshold where, on the one hand, they look like captions (explanations, illustrations), while on the other hand, they function as pictorial signs. It was very important for Kneubühler that this visual composition of script and sign was placed in the garden as well as protected from it. The insect’s track was naturally a part of the garden. But it had to be “protected” from its sensual dominance in order to attain to an autonomous existence. This autonomy, however, was merely relative, for the six-sided comb shaped structure was not fully closed. The joints between each side had been left slightly open. Thus when standing inside one could see at every juncture parts of the garden, and from the outside looking in one could see parts of the beetle’s track.

Theo Kneubühler’s work reflected his longtime epistemological studies in regard to the presuppositions and rule systems of visual perception in the context of the visual arts. By means of this, his concern with pictorial art in the medium of language continuously transforms the structural mentality of his analytic writing. One could speak of a plastic or pictorial work in lan-

guage which shows a certain affinity to poetry and to drawing, but nevertheless remains connected to the analytical or to the essay form. It is thus able to formulate and articulate boundary areas. Theo Kneubühler's pictorial-reflective writing is determined by the same creative will as that of any artist. As opposed to other artists, however, Kneubühler works with writing, with script, that must be read in a linear temporal process. It is not based upon a visual intention, but all the more does it appear to be "painted" out of the pictorial reflection upon the painted image. One could say that Kneubühler involves the art of the artist in a theoretical analysis in order finally to realize it by means of a transformative process of displacement as script.

JACQUES DERRIDA: "I AM INTERESTED IN THE IDIOM OF TRUTH IN PAINTING."

Jacques Derrida's philosophy of the *différance* is one of the most important achievements of the concentrated and condensed investigation of boundary transgressions and transitional domains characterizing our time. It would take us too far to attempt here to explicate in detail his influential work. Decisive for our exhibition was the fact that Derrida has had for years a stimulating impact upon artistic endeavors. This is due to his precise and persistent questioning of the primary and originary in its relation to what is considered secondary and derivative and to his deconstruction of the relation between language, script, and image. With this awareness, we attempted, together with him, to place a section of his extensive work in the spatial conglomerate of the exhibition in such a way that it could play out its linguistic and imaginative power, thus enriching and activating the garden philosophically as well as pictorially. In many of his books, Derrida has tried to lend the visual and artistic moment a role that determines the text; for example, *Glas* (1974), *La Vérité en peinture* (The Truth in Painting, 1978), or the biographical work that he edited together with Geoffrey Bennington, *Derridabase/Circonfession* (1991). On the other hand, in the exhibition, *Mémoires d'aveugle* that he organized in the Louvre in Paris (1990/91) he thematized reading pictures and viewing script by giving writing the same visual place as drawings, pastels, and paintings by various artists. For our exhibition in Lucerne, we painted the expression *Physis en différance* from his essay "La Différance" in large letters on the wall of the Kunsthalle. This gives Derrida's *différance*—his most important linguistic re-creation—a certain plasticity (respectively he draws attention to the significance of these components for the idea of *différance*) and, in the context of the visual arts, not only materializes its visual qualities, but also has a constituent effect on

the exhibition itself. By means of its optical appearance within the room, it decomposes the boundaries and the limits of the pictorial space and defines them anew, dissolves them and cultivates them, without at the same time leaving or abandoning its place of reflection.

In addition to this idiom, that appeared almost as a leitmotif, we also placed a text from Derrida upon the wall that undermined its pictorial and spatial force. For the reader/viewer, if they wanted to read/see it, had to go right up to it and thus successively deconstruct the installation (the exhibition *Der Anbau des Museums*) in its optic and physical presence and, as it were, dissolve it. He subjects himself to the linear expansion of printed language in the midst of the diverse scents of the garden in order to obtain a more concentrated “image” of the *différance*, which, however, at the same time reflects back into the space (the installation, the exhibition): For the text—the three first sections of the chapter “*Passe-partout*” from *La Vérité en peinture*—is hung below the large letters, set in eight picture frames. In this text, Derrida deconstructs the relation between language, writing, and image:

Someone, not me, comes and says the words: “I am interested in the idiom of painting” (l’idiome en peinture)... but what does he mean exactly? Does he mean that he is interested in the idiom “in painting” (en peinture), in the idiom itself, for its own sake, “in Painting”? ... That he is interested in the idiomatic expression itself, in the words “in painting”? Interested in words in painting or in the words “in painting”? Or in the words “in painting”? That he is interested in the idiom in painting, i.e., in what pertains to the idiom, the idiomatic trait or style (that which is singular, proper, inimitable) in the domain of painting, or else - another possible translation - in the singularity or the irreducible specificity of pictorial art, or that “language” which painting is supposed to be, etc.?³ With this, Derrida recalls Cézanne, who once wrote to Emile Bernard: “I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you.”⁴ But can he really tell it to us?

Derrida attempts to investigate all these questions and in the course of the investigation their incomprehensibility becomes more precise and fragmented: *La vérité en peinture passe partout*. The truth of painting is in painting as painting, as writing, as language... It is as much retinal as it is beyond the eye, there, where it makes the linguisticality and/or the act of speaking (about) art uncertain and precise, and displaces it.

Derrida's printed and framed statements were also effective and readable upon other levels in the exhibition. Seen from a distance they looked like the serial articulation of an abstract geometric picture that reflected the formal variety of the garden. Seen from close up, however, they added a minutiously effective pictorial sensuousness to the proud and spontaneous sensuality of the garden. Still more, they became the detailed caption to the spatially gripping, many leveled expression, "*physis en différence*," whose meaning and effectiveness they carefully differentiated, broke apart, and condensed. Derrida's statements were formulated in words and were literally intended: *Physis en différence*. But the power lies in their images which stimulate the viewers – *passe partout* – and encourage them to come closer, to see longer, to reflect in a more differentiated way, and to conceptually co-operate.

Stefan Banz, March 1992
Translated from the German by David J. Krieger

Notes

¹ The text appeared the first time in the original German version in *Artis, Zeitschrift für neue Kunst*, Bern 5/92, pp. 15–23; then in the German original version and in an English translation in *Kunsthalle Lucerne* (Lucerne: Verlag der Kunsthalle Luzern, 1993), pp. 30–50; later on it also appeared in the German original version in Stefan Banz, *Komplexes System Kunst, Texte und Interviews*, ed. by Hermann Korte (Münster, Hamburg, London: LIT Verlag, 2001), pp. 116–121. This version here has been linguistically revised and supplemented in some places on April 20, 2019.

² The essay appeared in *Marges de la Philosophie*, Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1972, pp. 1–29. English translation in *Margins in Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

³ See Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2. Cézanne wrote this sentence to Emile Bernard on October 23, 1905.